

# The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Kaftūn (Northern Lebanon) and Its Wall Paintings

*Preliminary Report 2009–2010*

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## Introduction

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A significant and fascinating issue regarding the relationship between medieval wall paintings and icons created in the coastal region of present-day Lebanon unexpectedly came to the fore in 2003 with the discovery of a mural fragment concealed beneath the roof structure of a church in Kaftūn, northern Lebanon. This event led to the launch of an extensive program of archaeological and conservation work. From the very beginning of this task it was obvious that only an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the newly discovered wall paintings in Kaftūn, taking into account their architectural and historical context, would make a fuller understanding possible. Accordingly, a range of specialists were invited to take part in this project, among them historians of Middle Eastern Christian art, epigraphers, historians of the Eastern Church, as well as conservators, chemists, and archaeologists working on the wider context of the paintings.

The following report serves a number of purposes. First, it provides an account of the work carried out at Kaftūn as part of a project cofinanced by a grant awarded by Dumbarton Oaks for 2009–2010. Second, it presents a broad picture of the issues raised by the discovery of the Kaftūn frescoes, by outlining the range of conservation measures undertaken and the subsequent studies in the fields of art history and architecture

initiated by this work, which has been carried out as an ongoing project since 2004 and will be concluded with the production of a final publication on the wall paintings and church at Kaftūn. In the interim, we deemed that a preliminary report would give numerous specialists in medieval Middle Eastern Christian art an initial overview of the discovery, and thus encourage discussions that may contribute to the forthcoming publication. We hope that a diachronic study of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus and its immediate surroundings, based on all of the available sources and incorporating a variety of research methods, will provide the impetus for a broad appraisal of churches built in the medieval period by both local and Latin Christian communities in the Principality of Antioch, the County of Tripoli, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

In view of this report's preliminary nature, comparative material has been limited to the essential minimum. We would also like to emphasize the preliminary and tentative nature of our conclusions, which will doubtless be modified as research work progresses in Kaftūn.

## The Kaftūn Conservation and Archaeology Project, 2004–2009

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A conservation and archaeology project was inspired by plans to restore the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus

in Kaftūn, which had been ravaged by both man and nature across time. Renovation work planned by the Greek Orthodox sisters from the local Saydet Kaftūn convent began in 2002, leading to the discovery in 2003 of several wall painting fragments located above the church roof. Thanks to the highly enterprising and effective initiative of Professor Leila Badre, Director of the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut, and with the support of the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Mount Lebanon, His Eminence Georges Khodr, a program of conservation work and architectural studies at the church in Kaftūn was put forward by the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw in September 2003. Once the proposal was accepted by the Directorate General of Antiquities, the program was implemented over six seasons from 2004 through 2009.

As conservation work at the church drew to an end, we realized that it was vital to secure additional funding in order to compile the documentation for the wall paintings and architecture that would be required for the final publication of the Kaftūn discoveries. This project, supported by Dumbarton Oaks, was executed during the academic year 2009–10. The fieldwork season that took place in Kaftūn in July and August 2009 allowed us to complete the recording of the church and its wall paintings. During the next phase of the project, from September 2009 through March 2010, these records were processed by different team members working on the photogrammetric modeling of the church and its decoration, the illustrations for publication, the laboratory analyses of samples taken from the church, and the analysis of the results of a limited survey of the village. Stereophotogrammetry allowed us to obtain scaled, high-resolution images of each painting—details as well as whole compositions. Likewise, detailed images of each of the façades of the church and the adjacent annex were produced. Subsequently, the data acquired was used to create a 3-D model of the church and its annex, as well as a 3-D model of the interior of the church with its wall paintings.

During our fieldwork at Kaftūn, we were also granted permission by the Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Mount Lebanon to access one of the most precious items of Lebanon's Christian heritage—a bilateral icon considered to be one of the oldest in the country—and to make a high-resolution photographic record of this

exceptional piece of art. One side of the icon bears a Hodegetria representation; the other depicts the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan. Both images are dated to the thirteenth century.

The opportunity was also seized to examine the icon's state of preservation. Cracks on the surface suggest that the climate inside the chapel needs to be altered.

## Churches and Wall Paintings in the County of Tripoli

TOMASZ WALISZEWSKI

Interest in the architecture and decoration of medieval churches of the Crusader period first arose in the mid-nineteenth century with the works of Melchior de Vogüé and Ernest Renan, but it was not until the twentieth century that this topic was expounded and given thorough consideration in the essential works of Camille Enlart and Denys Pringle.<sup>1</sup> The last of these scholars estimates that in the Kingdom of Jerusalem alone there were at least four hundred churches of the Eastern and Western rites active in the twelfth to thirteenth century; some have already been the subject of monographs and have been examined through archaeological excavation—a vital step in determining their chronology.

In contrast, medieval churches in the former Crusader County of Tripoli, which extended north of Beirut and Jounieh, have yet to be reviewed in an equally comprehensive study.<sup>2</sup> In an area that roughly equates to the territories of northern Lebanon (between Gibelet/Jbeil and Tripoli), over forty churches have survived to this day, most of which were built by local Maronite or Greek Orthodox communities for their

1 M. de Vogüé, *Les églises de la Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1860); E. Renan, *Mission de Phénicie* (Paris, 1864–74, repr. Beirut, 1997); C. Enlart, *Les monuments des croisés dans le royaume de Jérusalem: Architecture religieuse et civile*, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 7–8 (Paris, 1925–28); D. Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1993–2009). Denys Pringle's work relates exclusively to churches in present-day Israel, Jordan, and southern Lebanon; Gustav Kühnel has also written an important study of Crusader-period churches in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and their painted decoration: G. Kühnel, *Wall Painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Berlin, 1988).

2 For the latest summary of research into medieval churches in the Lebanon, together with an extensive bibliography on this subject, see T. Vorderstrasse, "Painted Churches of Medieval Lebanon," *Chronos: Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand* 24 (2011): 129–61.

own use. As many as twenty-eight of these churches feature traces of painted decoration, which to date has been the main focus of researchers.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, research into Lebanon's medieval churches comprised isolated descriptions of antiquities and attempts to understand the phenomenon of wall paintings. More detailed and wide-ranging efforts were not undertaken until the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. The greatest achievements in this field were attained by Lévon Nordiguian and Jean-Claude Voisin, who compiled an extensive photographic record of numerous churches and chapels dotted across the mountains of Lebanon, which were constantly exposed to the risk of damage wrought by humans and nature. Nordiguian provided a short description of each church, dividing them into single-, two-, or three-aisled structures.<sup>4</sup> In a series of books and articles, Mat Immerzeel and Nada Hélou undertook a more detailed iconographic analysis of the wall paintings adorning these churches, concentrating on stylistic issues and possible sources of inspiration from Byzantine, Syriac, and Western art, also relating them to icon painting.<sup>5</sup> A reliable point of reference was provided in 2004 by the monograph written by Erica Cruikshank Dodd, who published a catalogue of murals known from the churches and monasteries of Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> Today, the list of twenty-six churches with frescoes published by Cruikshank Dodd should be augmented by at least two new wall painting discoveries—at the church in Kaftūn and at Mar Elias Btina in Beirut.<sup>7</sup>

3 By comparison, 10 wall paintings have been recorded in Syria, 5 in Palestine, 15 in Egypt, and 13 in Cyprus (Vorderstrasse, "Painted Churches," 130).

4 L. Nordiguian and J.-C. Voisin, *Châteaux et églises du Moyen Âge au Liban*, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 2009). Another key study on Lebanese medieval churches and wall paintings is Y. Sader, *Painted Churches and Rock-Cut Chapels of Lebanon* (Beirut, 1997).

5 M. Immerzeel, "Inventory of Lebanese Wall Paintings," *Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East* 3 (2000): 3–19; idem, *Identity Puzzles: Medieval Christian Art in Syria and Lebanon*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 184 (Leuven, 2009); N. Hélou, "Wall Paintings in Lebanese Churches," *Essays on Christian Art and Culture in the Middle East* 2 (1999): 13–36, eadem, "Le décor des absides dans les églises du Liban," *Iconographica* 5 (2006): 32–47.

6 E. Cruikshank Dodd, *Medieval Painting in the Lebanon*, *Sprachen und Kulturen des christlichen Orients* 8 (Wiesbaden, 2004).

7 Work at the Church of Mar Elias Btina in Beirut was carried out in 2010–11 by a team from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw

All of the above-mentioned studies attempted to consider both the wall paintings and architecture, though the latter subject remains firmly in the shadow of the more spectacular iconographic discoveries. Consequently, it is difficult to correlate any chronological assessments made by art historians with other areas of knowledge about medieval Lebanon, which would build a more convincing chronology based on criteria other than art history alone. Thus it appears that research into the archaeology of the County of Tripoli is still at the stage of collating evidence, which is steadily disappearing as a result of carelessness, lethargy, or negligence. Research into wall paintings would be greatly enhanced by studying related aspects in the fields of architecture history, archaeology, and the sciences, as well as by examining written evidence produced by local communities in Greek, Arabic, or Syriac that are still not easily accessible to scholars. Where it was that the local Christian communities living in the mountains of northern Lebanon during the early Islamic period (in the seventh to tenth century) had their places of worship also remains an unanswered question, as there is no conclusive evidence for this period. One of the few available clues is provided by the Church of Mar Charbel in Ma'ad, which illustrates the transition from a Roman temple to an early Byzantine church, and subsequently to a medieval church, enlarged in the twelfth to the thirteenth century by the addition of east and west annexes.<sup>8</sup> Could it be that other medieval churches in Lebanon conceal similar secrets?

It has to be remembered that mountain villages operated at their own pace, which was quite different from that of coastal towns. Churches in Lebanon, built by and for local Christian communities without any perceptible or overtly intrusive interference from the Crusaders, remain an excellent example of the multicultural koine that, encompassing the Crusader states, Cyprus, and the whole eastern Mediterranean basin, resulted in a unique amalgam of Byzantine, Syriac, and Western traditions.

led by Krzysztof Chmielewski, at the instigation of Professor Leila Badre (American University of Beirut), who was also actively involved in this project. A preliminary report will be published in *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*.

8 F. Chausson and L. Nordiguian, "L'église de Ma'ad et ses inscriptions," *Syria* 73 (1996): 37–46, also Cruikshank Dodd, *Medieval Painting*, 316–36.



FIG. 1 The valley of the Nahr el Jawz with the monastery visible in the distance (T. Waliszewski; all figures except fig. 10 © Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and University of Warsaw).

## The Monastery at Kaftūn

TOMASZ WALISZEWSKI

The Greek Orthodox Monastery in Kaftūn is situated in a deep valley created by the Nahr el-Jawz, below the village of Kaftūn, some 10 km east-northeast of Batrun (fig. 1). The modern-day monastery building stands below a huge rock resembling an arch. The once-abandoned medieval church is situated on the riverbank, most probably occupying the site of an earlier monastic establishment known from written evidence (figs. 2–3).

The monastery was first mentioned in 1141 in a note written by Jacob of Rāmāt—a Maronite patriarch—when Daniel, a monk from Kaftūn, was

designated the abbot of the Monastery of Saint John (not the more famous Chrysostomos) at Kuzbandū (Koutsovendis), in the mountains near Nicosia, Cyprus.<sup>9</sup> Melkite sources from the mid-thirteenth century tell of the existence at Kaftūn of a much smaller monastery dedicated to the Mother of God, numbering only three monks, who were under the jurisdiction

9 For the most recent and comprehensive study of the history of the monastery see R. Jabre Mouawad, “Les mystérieux monastères de Keftūn au Liban à l’époque médiévale (XII<sup>e</sup>–XIII<sup>e</sup> s.): Maronite et puis melkite?” *Tempora (Annales d’Histoire et d’Archéologie)* 12–13 (2001–2): 95–113; see also eadem, “The District of Lower Batroun (Lebanon) During the Time of the Crusades: Part One, Kfar Chlaimane,” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 63 (2010–11): 411–41, esp. 428–34.





FIG. 2  
The Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus during conservation work. The temporary roof raised over the church and the stone-filled arcades of the north wall can be seen (K. Chmielewski).

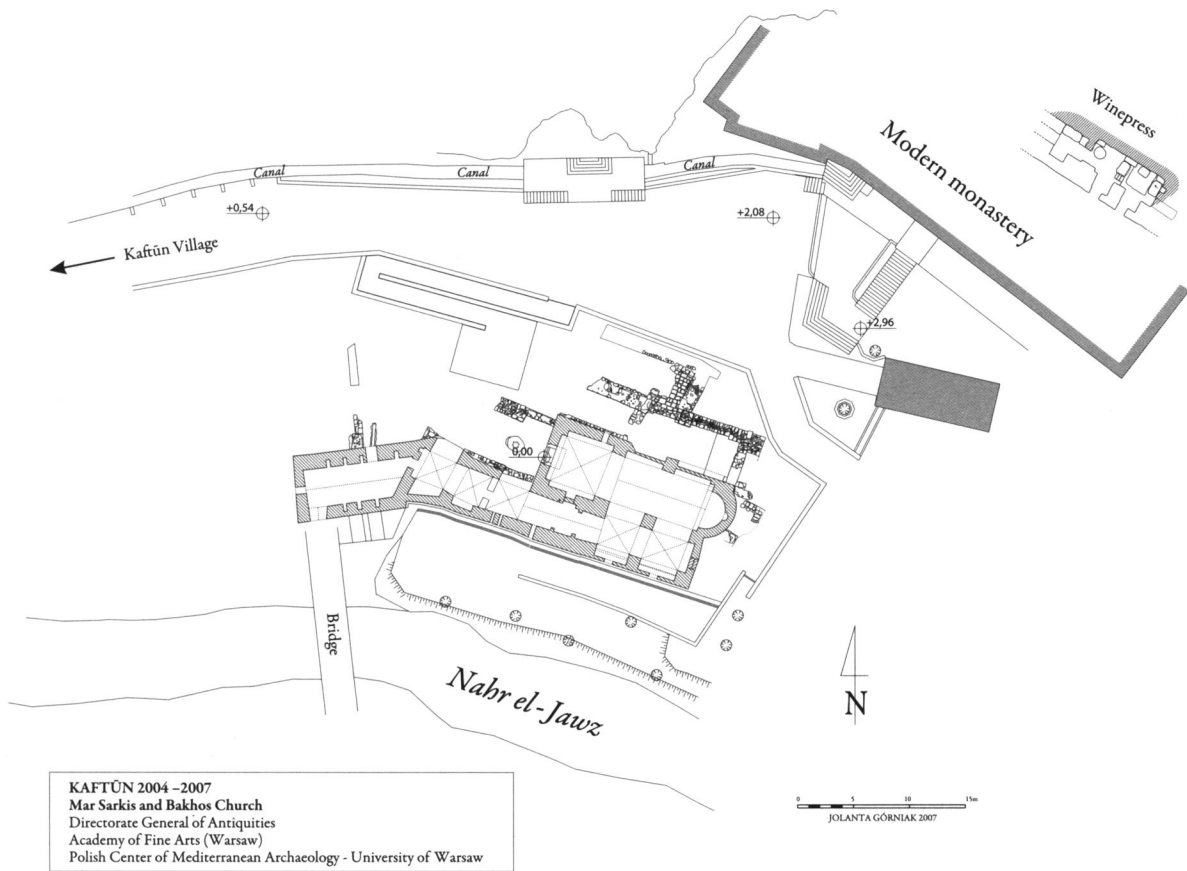


FIG. 3 Plan of the church and its immediate surroundings (J. Juchniewicz).

FIG. 4  
Rock-hewn stairs  
in one of the  
monastery rooms  
(T. Waliszewski).



of the Greek Orthodox bishop of the nearby city of Batrun. The complex culture of both monasteries is evidenced by the Syriac, Greek, and Arabic inscriptions found on the wall paintings in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus. The bilingualism of the monks, indiscriminately using Syriac and Arabic in their manuscripts, does not reveal their Maronite or Greek Orthodox affiliation, since both communities used both languages.

A later note, written in Syriac in 1283 by the Maronite patriarch Jeremy of Dmālā, sheds some light on the links connecting Kaftūn to the Crusaders. The note relates that the same Jeremy, until then archbishop of the monastery of Kaftūn, was elected Maronite patriarch at the intervention of the lord of Gibelet (Jbeil)—Guy of the Embriaci family, governing the city at that time—and became involved through this most unfortunate fact in a conflict between the lords of Gibelet and their suzerain from Tripoli, Prince Bohemond VII. The failed attempt by the lords of Gibelet to take control of Tripoli may have been why later sources alluded to Abā Simʿān ibn Jāqir as “the first abbot”: the Maronite monastery had most probably been seized, as

suggested by R. Jabre Mouawad, by the nearby smaller Greek Orthodox monastery, becoming part of a larger complex regarded as a new monastic establishment.

The later events connected to the fall of Tripoli in April 1289, and the Mamlūk occupation of the area, did not affect Kaftūn directly; it seems that the monastery remained active during the Mamlūk-Ottoman period and only at the end of that period experienced a slow decay that finally led to the abandonment of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus.

Scant archaeological evidence of the monastery’s medieval phase, known from historical sources, is concealed beneath the contemporary chapel, in which a bilateral icon of the Virgin Hodegetria is housed. This evidence comes in the guise of a sequence of rooms most probably associated with the production of wine, as suggested by the niche for a beam, a basin, and adjacent collecting vats or cisterns (fig. 4). There are also many sites in the valley of the Nahr el-Jawz—a fertile land suitable for gardens and orchards—that might be linked to the monastic property: two Ottoman-period bridges spanning the shores of the river, the nearby water-mill, and a derelict Ottoman-period village with





FIG. 5  
Stone buildings  
in the river valley,  
below the monastery  
(T. Waliszewski).



FIG. 6  
Interior of one  
of the Ottoman-  
period houses in  
the river valley (T.  
Waliszewski).

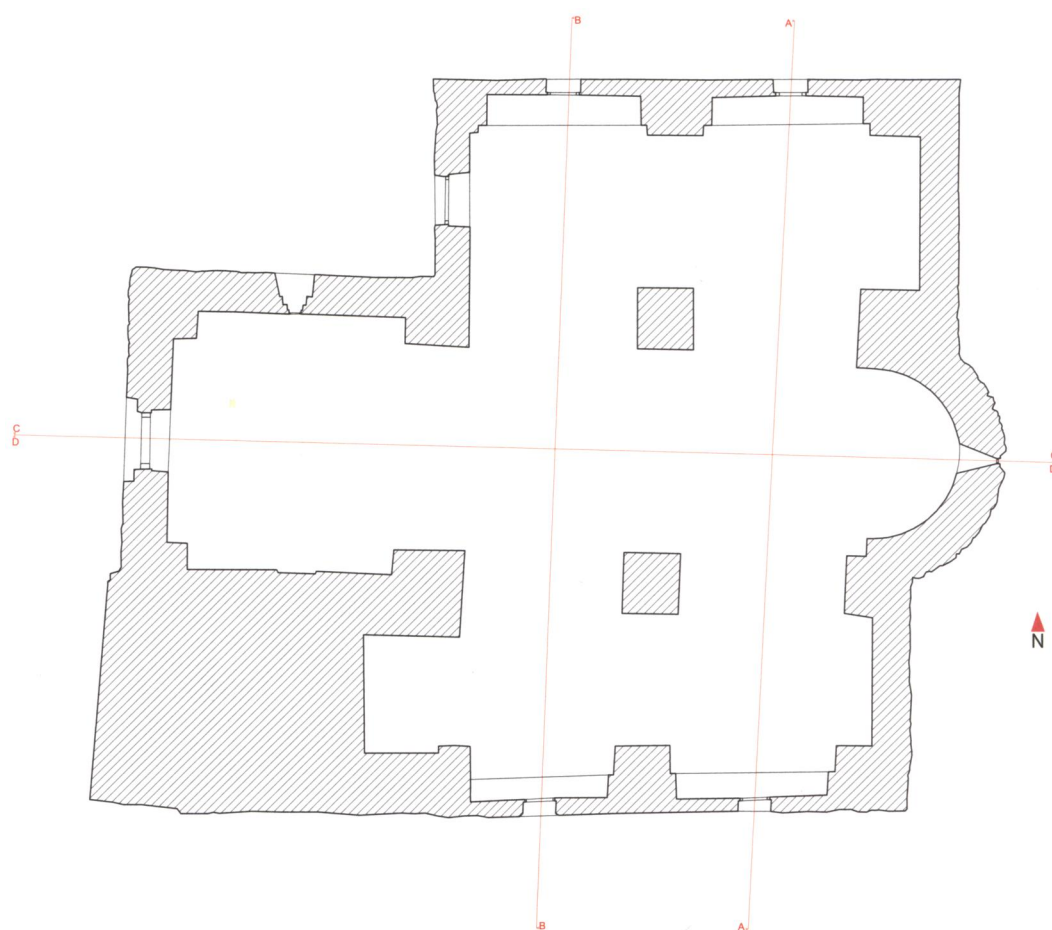


FIG. 7 Plan of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, including the rebuilt north aisle (M. Gładki and K. Czajkowski).

a few houses. Due to the absence of any comparable architecture from the region, we can classify them only as typical rural dwellings from the late Ottoman and Mandate period, until recently rarely recorded during archaeological or ethnographic research in Lebanon. The settlement itself, due to its proximity, probably had close ties with the monastery. Future detailed analysis of these structures will be necessary to better comprehend the context of the church, as well as the extent of the monastery and its economic foundations (figs. 5–6).

### The Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Kaftūn

TOMASZ WALISZEWSKI

The Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, constructed using local building materials—limestone and ordinary,

unworked fieldstones—is situated approximately 30 m southwest of the main monastery building, on a lower terrace overlooking the channel of the Nahr el-Jawz. The extant parts of its original structure include the nave (8.42 m long, 4.70 m wide), punctuated by six pillars, on which a series of arches were raised, together with the apse and a south aisle. The presbytery took the form of a platform installed at a height of 0.20 m above the original floor level, occupying the whole apse and encroaching into the nave ca. 1.44 m. The annexes built in line with the south aisle have a combined length of ca. 17.80 m and an average width of 2.50 m. They terminate in a room which once served as a watermill. In its present form the annex is divided by a series of arches into four rooms and a mill (figs. 7–8).<sup>10</sup>

10 Preliminary reports on the architecture of the church at Kaftūn, by K. Juchiewicz, can be found in K. Chmielewski and T.



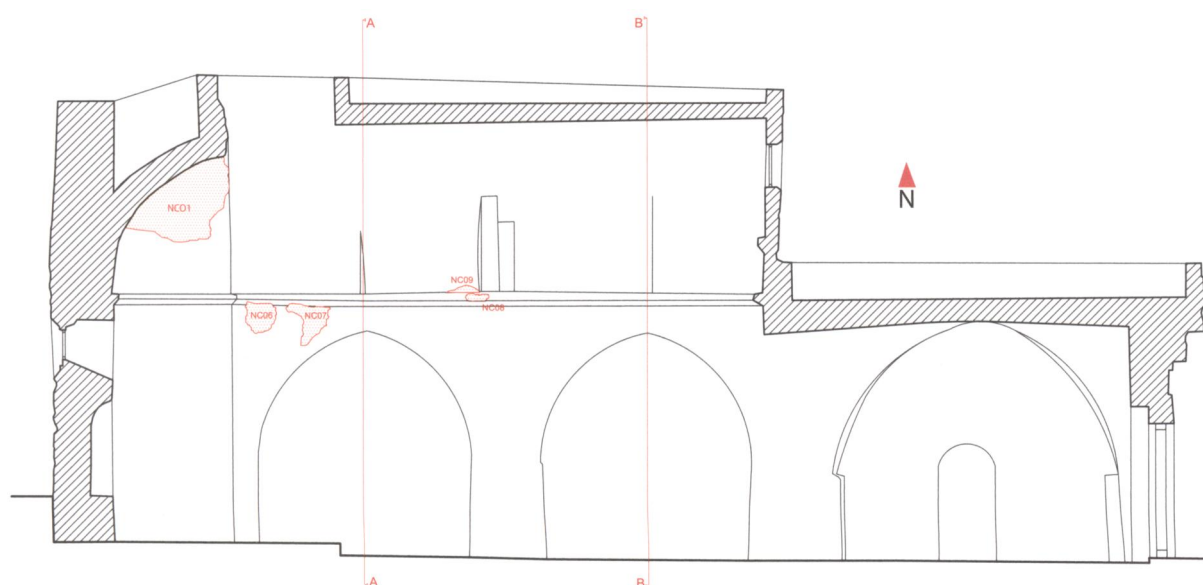


FIG. 8 Cross section of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus, showing the distribution of extant wall paintings on the south wall of the nave and at the southern side of the apse (M. Gładki and K. Czajkowski).

When the project began in 2004, the church had already been cleaned up and partly restored, limiting to a minimum the possibility of any archaeological observations. Hence, the most important method of study applicable to its architecture was careful analysis of the masonry joints visible on the outside, but not usually detectable inside. A detailed study of the façades proved to be essential in reconstructing the history of the church's evolution and tracing its fundamental phases of development. Further evidence was available from the archaeological remains discovered during construction work to the north and east of this building. Analysis of the plaster on the walls of the church represented another important source of information. Structural joints, changes in masonry bond patterns, stoneworking methods, blocking, and all wall alterations were taken into consideration in determining a

preliminary relative chronology for the church, as there is no absolute dating evidence (fig. 9).

The early data emerging from the study allowed us to formulate the following reconstruction of the church's history. From the very beginning of its existence the church was a three-aisled building, as evidenced by the homogeneity of its east wall and by the vestibule preceding the nave.<sup>11</sup> It seems certain that the north aisle was abutted on the north by structures which may have formed part of the medieval monastery, extending toward the contemporary monastery building.

There are two main phases identifiable in the church's development: before its structural failure and after it. This failure affected primarily the north aisle and the north wall of the vestibule and involved the collapse of the north aisle and probably also those structures to its north and west, those within the vestibule and the nave, as well as the structures to the northwest

Waliszewski, "Kaftoun—Conservation and Restoration of the Mar Sarkis Church Murals: Interim Report," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 16 (2005): 447–52, and eidem, "The Church of Mar Sarkis and Bakhos in Kaftūn and Its Wall Paintings: Preliminary Report 2003–2007," *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises* 11 (2007): 277–323; see also Vorderstrasse, "Painted Churches," 146–48.

11 Among the several comparable churches in northern Lebanon, the one which has the most similar ground plan is the Church of Mar Saba in Edde; see L. Nordiguian and N. Reveyron, "L'église Mar Saba Eddé (Batroun)," *Tempora (Annales d'Histoire et d'Archéologie)* 12–13 (2001–2): 115–23 and Cruikshank Dodd, *Medieval Painting*, 280–91.



FIG. 9 Eastern elevation of church with apse (M. Gładki and K. Czajkowski).

of the vestibule, in front of the main entrance. The north aisle, which was not rebuilt following this calamitous event, was traceable in the building's layout and in the church's north and east elevations. Also visible in plan were those structures which abutted the church from the north, namely walls and a stone floor with a door opening, and probably also an extension added to the west of the nave. The earlier roof was most likely flat, resting on horizontal beams and made up of a stone or earthen fill. Traces of the original roof structure take the form of vertical wall fragments surviving to a maximum height of 0.68 m on the inside of the nave, above the cornice.

Remodeling is evidenced by a change in the roof structure, a ribbed barrel vault having been installed during the second of the church's two main phases, thus dictating alterations to the façade of the nave and vestibule. As a result of this restructuring, new walls were built to block the access afforded by the two arches connecting the nave with the north aisle. These blocking walls survive to this day.

The reason for the structural failure of the northern part of the church, which may have occurred in the late thirteenth century or even later, remains unknown and stemmed either from natural causes, such as an earthquake, or human-induced destruction, which was quite common in the County of Tripoli during the medieval period. A parallel account was related in the seventeenth century by Estephanus ed-Dwaihi, the Maronite

patriarch, who made an entry in his chronicle under the heading of AD 1243 about the burial of Hannah el-Franjiyeh in the Mar Charbel church at Ma'ad, explaining that it was made possible "because her father, known as the baker, had constructed the roof of the church after the first which was beautiful was destroyed. . . ."<sup>12</sup>

In summary, prior to the episode of structural failure, the church in its ultimate form consisted of a nave covered by a flat roof, and of two side aisles, a vestibule, and most probably a sequence of structures extending the entire building further west: annexes added to both aisles and a room preceding the vestibule. Further rooms, of which no details are known, featured behind the apse.

## Discovery of the Wall Paintings, Their Technique, and Their Conservation

KRZYSZTOF CHMIELEWSKI

### *Circumstances of the Discovery*

For many years the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus remained abandoned and ultimately fell into ruin. Its structure—external walls and interior—were damaged in equal measure. The ground level around the church steadily rose, gradually burying the building's outer walls. The layers of soil which accumulated along the

12 Translated by N. Hérou in Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, 107.



north wall reached up to the base of the arches forming the arcades, mounting up around the apse to the height of the window in the apse's main axis. In some places the ground rose to over two meters above its original level (fig. 10).

The church interior also underwent severe deterioration, resulting in the complete destruction of the floor. The walls and vaults were coated with dirty, damaged plaster of a greenish-grey hue. The plaster surface was covered with drip marks and numerous stains resulting from the effects of damp and from the growth of microorganisms. Plants had laid down roots between the plaster layers, causing them to crack and become delaminated from the wall surface in many places.

The main factor which had, over the centuries, brought about and accelerated the destruction of the building was water—both in the guise of precipitation

and as water encroaching from the stream that runs just below the church, barely a few meters away from the south wall. The Nahr el-Jawz is one of the main rivers in northern Lebanon, descending from the mountains to the Mediterranean Sea. In the summer its channel, which is several meters wide at this point, is virtually dry. However, in autumn, during periods of intense rainfall, and in spring, when vast quantities of snow melt in the mountains, this modest stream becomes a fast-flowing river. Soaking liberally into the ground around the church, the water also permeates its walls, where it is drawn upward by capillary action. This results in excessive moisture accumulating in the walls, destroying the mortar binding its stone building blocks, compromising the plaster, and encouraging the growth of microorganisms, fungi, and mold, as well as larger plants.



FIG. 10 The Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus prior to conservation work (courtesy of S. Sabbagha).

FIG. 11

Fragment of a wall painting discovered in 2003 above the church's vaulting. Secured cracks on the painting's surface can be seen (K. Chmielewski).



In 2002 renovation work on the church began with the aim of restoring it to its function as a place of worship. The overgrown exterior walls were cleared of plants and consolidated, and the build-up of soil around the building was removed.

In 2003, when work began on clearing the soil and rubble covering the outer roof surface, two fragments of wall painting came to light above the apse. It was where the wall paintings were found rather than their discovery per se which was surprising. There could be only one explanation for this intriguing location of the uncovered mural fragments—on an exposed, outer wall, above the level of the vaulting. The existing barrel vault above the nave is not original, and must have been installed following the collapse of an earlier vault. The symmetrical downward sweep of the new vault's frontal arch divided the composition into two separate parts, while also partially obscuring it. The face of a youth encircled by a halo began to emerge from beneath the soil and rubble on the left (north) side. The fragment visible on the right (south) side was a depiction of the face of the Virgin Mary framed by a maphorion, with two poorly discernible,

though legible, inscriptions—MP and ΘΥ—on either side of her halo. This incontrovertibly identified the composition as a scene of the Annunciation, featuring the Archangel Gabriel on the left and the Virgin on the right (Fig. 11).

#### *The Wall Paintings and Their Conservation*

When I was asked in the summer of 2003 to assess the possibility of salvaging the discovered mural fragments, my first recommendation was that a temporary roof be erected above the nave and the apse in order to protect them from heavy autumn and winter rainfall.<sup>13</sup> At the same time I undertook to carry out essential conservation work in the following year on the uncovered fragments, and to assess whether there was any further extant painted decoration beneath the secondary layers of plaster in the church interior.

This work began in the summer of 2004. Tests were carried out on the uppermost plaster layer using

13 Efforts to protect the wall paintings were instigated by Professor Leila Badre from the American University of Beirut, who had been actively involved in their salvage for many years.





FIG. 12  
Uncovering of the paintings  
in the upper section of the  
apse (T. Waliszewski).



FIG. 13  
Removal of secondary  
plaster from the walls of  
the nave (T. Waliszewski).

chisels, knives, flat spatulas, and hammers (figs. 12–13). Careful removal of the top plaster coat gradually and systematically revealed increasingly large areas of the underlying strata. After a week's work the secondary plaster in the upper section of the apse above the cornice had been completely removed, revealing a Deesis scene depicted as an Apocalyptic Vision. Christ Pantokrator holds an open book in his left hand, his

right hand making a gesture of benediction. The figure of Christ is flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist, both depicted in an attitude of prayer and supplication. One of two seraphim holding a *labarum* in his hands is also extant between Christ and the Virgin. As soon as successive fragments of wall painting were uncovered they had to be appropriately consolidated to prevent their becoming detached from



their substrate. No fragments of decoration were found below the level of the cornice in the apse, but the first tests on both walls of the nave, immediately adjacent to the apse, revealed the presence of painted strata. Complete removal of the overlying secondary plaster revealed parts of a representation of the Communion of the Apostles divided into two scenes positioned symmetrically on opposite sides of the nave. Christ is depicted on the north wall, his left arm bent at the elbow and holding a broad, flat dish filled with *prosphora*, his right hand administering communion bread to the first in a row of six apostles standing before him. On the south wall, an analogous scene (much less of which survives) shows Christ standing before a ciborium covered by a canopy, with only negligible fragments of three apostles visible in front of him. In 2005 the standing figures of saints on the pillars of the arcade were also discovered.

From the start, conservation work on the wall paintings in Kaftūn was carried out while successively uncovering them. The paintings were severely damaged and under serious threat of further deterioration. The primary danger was posed by extensive internal delamination of the plaster layers, which in many areas were at risk of losing all adhesion with the underlying stone substrate. The plaster strata were consolidated using multiple injections of specialist mineral binding agents (fig. 14). The structure of the compromised plaster edges on the extant fragments of wall painting were additionally reinforced by impregnating them with a water-soluble synthetic resin. These edges were subsequently secured with fresh mortar.

A serious problem faced by conservators was how to tackle the process of cleaning the painted surfaces of the hard coatings formed by secondary crystallization of water-soluble salts. Many areas of the wall paintings were covered in a thick layer of calcite. When lime plaster is exposed to high moisture levels for long periods of time decarbonation of calcite takes place within the plaster as the calcite is carried outward with the water, after which the process of recarbonation takes place on the painted surface. This type of damage is very common in this region, a result of the walls being exposed to heavy rainfall in autumn and winter, and then drying out in the prevailing high temperatures of spring and summer. The frequent repetition of this process, along with the vaults and roofs not being waterproof and the walls being inadequately



FIG. 14 Consolidation of the plaster in the nave (M. Baran).



FIG. 15 Cleaning the surface of wall paintings on the north wall of the nave (M. Baran).





FIG. 16  
Frescoes on the north wall of the nave were revealed by removing secondary layers of plaster, and their painted surfaces were cleaned (M. Baran).



FIG. 17  
Detail of the Communion of the Apostles on the north wall seen during the final phase of cleaning its painted surface (M. Baran).

damp-proofed, exacerbates the negative effects. Removing the calcite by chemical methods alone without exposing the paintings to additional damage is impossible. The only alternative is to carry out the labor-intensive, time-consuming, and painstaking task of carefully controlled mechanical cleaning, chiefly using surgical scalpels (figs. 15–17). The results obtained using this method of cleaning at Kaftūn proved to be satisfactory. However, comprehensive cleaning of a wall painting's surface was not pursued on those parts of the paint layers that may have been endangered by this procedure. Where appropriate,

particularly in those areas painted using red pigments, the powdering paint layer was consolidated by impregnating it with acrylic resin (fig. 18). The decisions undertaken regarding the ultimate appearance of the paintings after conservation had to reconcile the requirement that their authenticity be preserved with their aesthetic appearance inside the church, taking into account its reinstatement as a place of worship. In view of the artistic merit and historic significance of the murals, any attempt at reconstructing their artistic form would be unacceptable. Thus, work was limited as far as possible to procedures aimed



FIG. 18  
Final stage of  
conservation  
treatment of the  
wall paintings  
in the apse  
(A. Maciejewski).



exclusively at consolidating and securing the paintings. Where it was feasible to make the form more legible, limited retouching of the paint layers was performed. All retouching was executed so that it visibly differed from the original strata. A distinctly lighter shade than the surrounding color was used to fill very small losses. Larger losses were retouched using the *tratteggio* technique, which allows the retouched area to be identified at close range as a series of closely spaced vertical brushstrokes of color that from a distance blend in with the composition as a whole. All retouching was carried out using pigments with a synthetic, reversible binding medium, making them easy to remove (figs. 19–20).

A separate problem addressed during the course of conservation work was the reunification of the wall paintings at the east end, which had been divided when vaulting was installed at a lower level inside the church. In order for the Annunciation scene to once again become part of the church interior, the first bay of the vault had to be dismantled and replaced by a new, higher roof. This issue was repeatedly discussed because of its controversial nature. Although opening the vault would restore compositional and

iconographic unity to the wall paintings, it would also entail major interference in the building's architectural structure. Ultimately, it was decided to proceed with this course of action, and at present the paintings in the presbytery have regained their conceptual and artistic coherence.

Over the years, renovation work on the church building took place concurrently with the conservation of the wall paintings.<sup>14</sup> The north aisle was rebuilt using the south aisle as a model. The walls were structurally reinforced and a water drainage system was installed beneath the church's new floor. The temporary metal roof having been removed, a lightweight flat roof was raised above the main body of the church. Inside, wall surfaces with no extant paintings were coated with a fresh layer of white lime plaster. The church was opened for worship on completion of all conservation work in 2009. The discovered and salvaged wall paintings are its highly prized and most significant decoration (fig. 21).

14 Architectural and building work was carried out under the direction of the architect Mr. Saba Sabbagha and the engineer Aziz al-Rachkidy.





FIG. 19 Retouching of the paint layer of the Annunciation scene (R. Tusznió).



FIG. 20 The face of an archangel on the north wall after conservation. *Tratteggio* retouching of the paint layer is evident (R. Tusznió).



FIG. 21 The church interior on completion of conservation work (R. Tusznió).

### Wall Painting Technique

Detailed examination and chemical analyses were used to determine the nature and sequence of individual plaster layers and paint layers on the walls of the church, and to identify their composition.<sup>15</sup>

The substrate for the painted decoration is a wall built from limestone blocks of more-or-less regular shape, their surfaces having been worked with varying degrees of precision. The stone blocks used in the arches of the arcades exhibit greater regularity, are more carefully hewn, and fit one another better than those used elsewhere.

The stones of the walls and vaulting were bonded with a dark brown lime and clay mortar. The binding agent in this mortar consists of calcite and clay minerals in the form of illite and kaolinite; quartz grains of various sizes constitute the filler. Finer grains represent clay components, while coarser grains probably represent sand added to the mortar. This type of mortar provides a good bond and is commonly noted in stone wall construction in the Lebanon.

In some places up to four layers of plaster survive on the walls. On the most highly curved surfaces (those of the apse and the intradoses of the arcades) a render layer was applied directly onto the wall in order to reduce this curvature and so improve the adhesion of successive layers. In the arcades a lime and clay render was used which was of a composition similar to the mortar holding together the stones of the wall. Metal tools were used to make impressions in the render before it set, affording its surface a distinctive texture. This provided a key for the next layer of plaster. Additionally, in those parts of the apse where the wall surfaces were most curved, a pale grey render was applied in thicknesses

ranging from several millimeters up to ca. 2 cm. This render has a calcite binding medium and a filler comprising crumbs of calcium carbonate and quartz grains, with the addition of ground pottery and crushed charcoal. The addition of charcoal was intended to slow down the process of the render's setting and hardening, thus preventing any cracks appearing in it. In some areas render was also used to even out the greatest differences between the stones making up the wall of the nave. In several places broken pottery sherds were pressed into the render. Thus, as well as reducing the curvature of the arches, this render layer also served to fill in any large depressions in the wall surfaces.

When the church was remodeled in the thirteenth century its interior walls were probably coated with white plaster, which was applied either directly onto the stone substrate or, as in those areas mentioned above, on top of a layer of priming render. Its thickness varied from several millimeters to 2 cm. The binding medium is calcite and the bulk of the filler comprises crumbs of microcrystalline and fine-crystalline limestone with smaller quantities of dried clay crumbs containing fine-crystalline quartz and illite (fig. 22). This plaster was unmistakably smoothed, and coated with a layer of whitewash. Its texture is clearly perceptible in many areas. The interior walls must have been covered with this bare whitewashed plaster for some time. After a certain period had elapsed (probably not too long, as these layers show no significant signs of dirt), the plaster was hacked at with a hammer to create a keyed surface onto which the next plaster coat was applied. The paintings were then executed directly on this topcoat.

The uppermost plaster coat supporting the paint layer varies in thickness from barely ca. 2 mm to ca. 1 cm. It is a typical white lime plaster, similar in character and chemical composition to that described above. However, in this instance the binding medium clearly predominates the filler, which also consists of a prevalence of limestone crumbs and a small quantity of clay crumbs. The plaster was meticulously smoothed before the paintings were begun.

The fundamental layers of the painting were applied to the plaster while it was still wet, using pigments mixed with water. As the plaster dried the pigments became permanently bound to its surface. The lower layers of the painting were executed in the wet fresco technique (*buon fresco*), the upper finishing layers probably having been painted as dry frescos, using

15 Chemical analyses were carried out by Irena Koss and Elżbieta Jeżewska at the laboratory of the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. During the fieldwork season of 2009 samples of the paintings, pigments, and binding material were taken. Twenty-two of these samples were analyzed at the laboratory of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. A microscopic and instrumental analysis was employed using a Nikon stereoscopic microscope 100× and a Nikon Biological Microscope 680× for microchemical and microcrystalloscopic methods. Thin sections were prepared for petrographic analysis of every sample using an Oton petrographic polarizing microscope 480×. Thin sections were viewed under two different lighting conditions—plain polarized light and crossed polarizers. Also, an instrumental analysis—X-Ray diffractometry (XRD)—was applied. Two samples are presented in the report as an example.



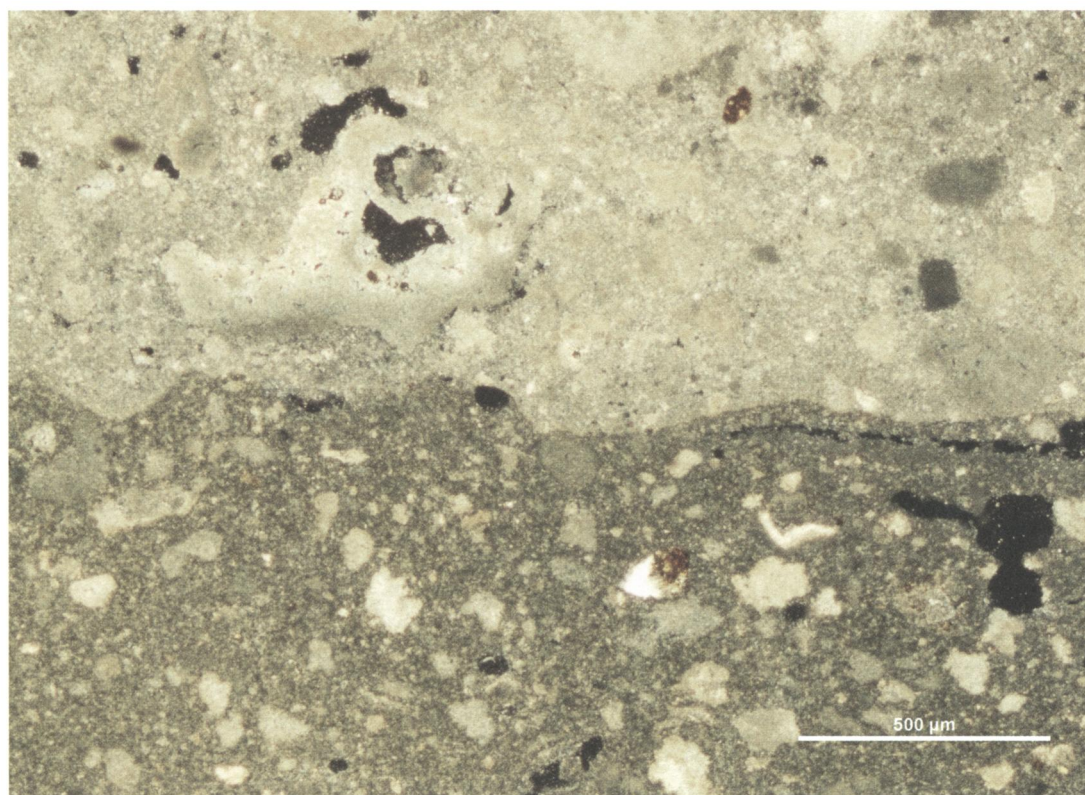


FIG. 22 Microscope photograph of samples taken from original plaster layers. Two layers of plaster and numerous crumbs of lime filler can be seen (I. Koss and K. Jeżewska).

pigments mixed with limewater. Chemical analysis did not reveal the presence of any organic binding media in the paint layers. The character and composition of the plaster on which the paintings were executed, as well as the painting technique employed, are very similar to the fresco technique used in Byzantine art.<sup>16</sup> These are paintings which were executed by consistently adhering to the principle of adding successive layers of color to ultimately obtain a specific artistic effect. The paintings' layered construction is directly observable where the representations are well preserved, but can also be seen in those areas where the upper layers of paint are damaged, thus making the lower layers of underpainting more visible. Individual paint layers are also visible in section in the samples taken for analysis.

The painting process itself can be reconstructed as follows. The initial compositional drawing, rendered in brown pigment on the still-wet plaster, was painted

in bold, proficient strokes, its outlines defining the principal shapes of the representations. The first colored undercoats were also applied onto wet plaster. The areas of the face and hands were given a dark green undercoat (known as the *proplasmos*—a characteristic feature of Byzantine painting technique); the robes were usually underpainted in shades of ocher and red, blue backgrounds having been earlier given a dark grey undercoat. Individual elements of the representations were modeled in the subsequent layers using shades of ocher and green for areas of flesh, and shades of the relevant colors (blues, reds, and greens) for individual garments. Dark lines were used to accentuate the contours of anatomical details and to define drapery, elements of armour, strands of hair, the edges of featured objects, and so forth. Finally, highlights were rendered in pure white—thin lines being painted around the eyes, on the nose and chin, around the lips, and on the bulges and edges of the robes.

Chemical analyses carried out on the paint layers led to the identification of the pigments used, natural

16 P. Mora, L. Mora, and P. Philippot, *Conservation of Wall Paintings* (London and Boston, 1984), 107–17.

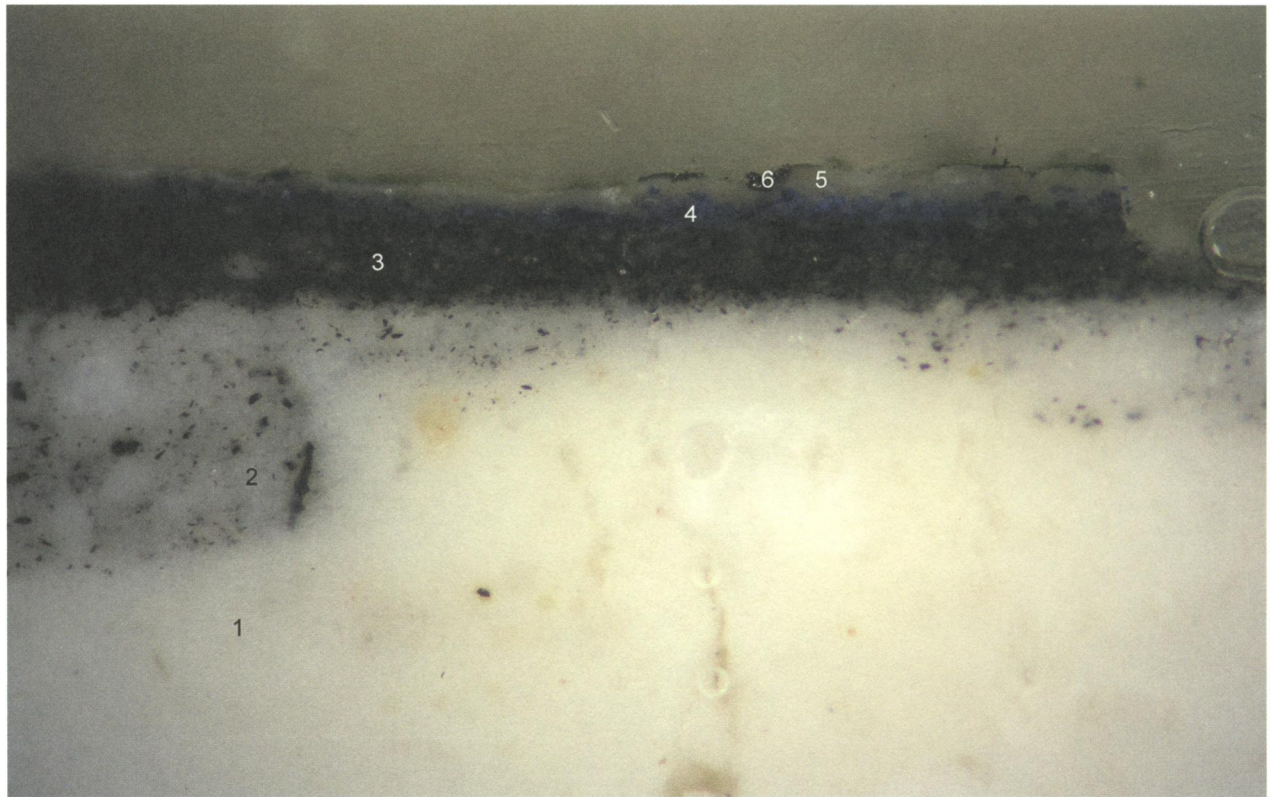


FIG. 23 Microscope photograph of sample taken from a blue background. The following sequence of strata can be seen: (1) plaster layer, (2) pale grey undercoat containing plant black, (3) plant black layer, (4) blue layer containing natural ultramarine, (5) transparent layer of secondary calcite, and (6) dirt layer (I. Koss and K. Jeżewska).

ultramarine predominating in the blue areas of the paintings' backgrounds. A thin layer of ultramarine was applied over an underlying layer of dark grey paint containing plant black. Ultramarine, along with natural iron oxide red, was also identified in the robes of the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation scene. The presence of iron oxide red was also noted in the red robe worn by Christ in the Deesis, and in the plant tendril motif which features in the first arcade on the north side. Iron oxide yellow was identified in the robe of St. John the Baptist in the Deesis, and in the robe of one of the saints in the first arcade on the north side. Plant black was identified in many locations as a pigment supplement, to achieve a specific color tone. Calcium carbonate was used for pure white and as an addition used to lighten the color of various other pigments.

The artists who created the murals in Kaftūn employed the customary range of pigments used in wall painting during the medieval period, based primarily

on natural pigments, including iron oxide reds and yellows.<sup>17</sup> The abundant use of ultramarine is noteworthy (fig. 23). As is widely known, this pigment—obtained from the mineral lapis lazuli—was very expensive in the medieval period.<sup>18</sup> The background of a wall painting was often first covered with a dark undercoat using a black pigment, and only then was a thin coat of blue (ultramarine or azurite) applied on top. In the case of ultramarine, its price was a key factor. Nevertheless, if we take into consideration that the wall paintings originally covered a much greater surface area than at present (certainly the lower part of the apse and the

17 D. V. Thompson, *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting* (New York, 1956); D. C. Winfield, "Middle and Later Byzantine Wall Painting: A Comparative Study," *DOP* 22 (1968): 61–139.

18 N. Eastaugh, V. Walsh, T. Chaplin, and R. Siddall, *Pigment Compendium: A Dictionary and Optical Microscopy of Historical Pigments* (Oxford, 2008), 381–82.





FIG. 24 Detail of the face of St Bacchus after cleaning. Layers of green underpainting can be seen in the shadows around the nose and eye (R. Tusznió).

walls above cornice level in the nave), to cover all of the surfaces in the backgrounds of the various compositions would have required a significant quantity of this expensive pigment. This offers indirect evidence of the artistic rank of this enterprise, and of the financial capacity of those who commissioned it.

A separate issue is that of the technological and chronological homogeneity of the paintings. Without disregarding the stylistic differences observed by researchers (see remarks made by N. Helou and M. Immerzeel below) between the representations on the walls of the nave and the rest of the paintings, it has to be stressed that in technological terms these differences are not so obvious. No differences were observed in the character or chemical composition of the plaster layers, or in the sequences in which they were laid. It appears that all of the extant paintings, regardless of their location within the church, were executed on the same, thin, homogeneous plaster topcoat. Likewise,

no differences can be seen in the structure of the paint layers themselves. Their composition and, more importantly, the principles dictating the manner in which forms were built up by applying successive layers of paint, are similar throughout. Areas of underpainting were successively superimposed by layers creating the modeled detail, which were in turn overlaid by layers of highlights and darker shadows. This is evident in the modeling of both faces and clothing (fig. 24).

In assessing the differences between the frescoes, their state of preservation must be taken into account. The paintings in the upper section of the apse and the representations in the arcades are the most severely damaged, and in many places they are entirely devoid of the topmost layers of brushstrokes. Often, what we can now see are only the lower layers of underpainting and the initial compositional drawing. In consequence, the artistic form is flattened in these areas, devoid of its original spatial depth and color subtleties. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that there are noticeable stylistic differences between the extant fragments of mural in the nave and the remaining representations. Despite this, the artists who created the paintings at Kaftūn, regardless of which fragments they were responsible for, shared a high level of technical and artistic expertise. The technical knowledge they possessed, and their ability to attain the finished artistic effect through the gradual build-up of successive layers of complementary colors, are of clearly Byzantine origin. These skills could have been acquired only during an apprenticeship in a workshop producing commissioned works of a high technical and artistic standard. It cannot be precluded that there were two groups of artists (or two artists) working simultaneously at the church in Kaftūn, each differing in acquired stylistic traits, but retaining a similar, high level of technical skills. Where exactly they learned these skills remains unresolved.

The quality of the Kaftūn wall paintings is unparalleled by any other painted decoration created in Lebanon during the twelfth or thirteenth century, with only one exception—namely, the recently uncovered wall paintings in the small church of Saydet Kharayeb, which overlooks the village of Kfar Helda, located on the Nahr el-Jawz, no more than 10 km east of Kaftūn.<sup>19</sup>

19 Work at Kfar Helda was carried out by a team from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, under the direction of K. Chmielewski. This work is organized and funded by the





FIG. 25 Detail of the face of Christ from the Deesis in the Church of Saydet Kharayeb in Kfar Helda (J. Morzycki-Markowski).



FIG. 26 The face of St. John the Baptist from the Deesis in the Church of Saydet Kharayeb in Kfar Helda (J. Morzycki-Markowski).



A Deesis scene of the apocalyptic variety, remarkably similar to the Deesis in Kaftūn, was discovered in the upper portion of the apse, beneath a layer of black soot, evidencing a fire at some point in the past. The similarity between these works of art is not confined solely to their compositional qualities, style, and the comparable proportions of the figures, but is also clearly visible in the technology used in both paintings. Although part of the composition is missing, the extant fragments of the painting in Kfar Helda have survived in far better condition. The same artistic skill is witnessed here in the use of multiple layers to build up the modeled detail. This is particularly evident in the wonderfully well-preserved face of Christ (fig. 25). The greens used in the underpainting of the face mingle with the warm tones of successive layers of yellow ocher. The illusion of deep shadows was effected using thin layers of cool greens and browns. Anatomical details have been painted with great precision, with attention paid to variations in color tone—on the lips, around the eyes, and in their pupils, as well as in individual strands of hair. The remarkably well-preserved face of Christ in Kfar Helda gives some idea of how the paintings in Kaftūn may originally have looked. It can be said that what is now missing because of decay can be found in the technological strata and quality of artistic form in the painting from Kfar Helda. These similarities are also applicable to the more severely damaged faces of the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist (fig. 26).

To comprehend how far the paintings discovered in both these locations differ in terms of their complex technology from others in the Lebanon, they can be compared, for example, with the paintings in the south chapel of Mar Charbel Church in Ma'ad or with the paintings in Mar Tadros Church in Bahdeidat.<sup>20</sup> The much simpler, more schematic style of these paintings is largely attributable to the use of a technology less complicated than that employed at Kaftūn and Kfar Helda, which precluded the achievement of light-and-shade spatial modeling effects, and subtleties in color.

Association pour la Restauration et l'Étude des Fresques Médiévales du Liban (AREFML).

20 I. Doumet-Skaf and G. Capriotti with contributions by G. Salem, B. Jabbour-Gedeon, and L.-A. Hunt, "Conservation of 13th Century Mural Paintings in the Church of St. Theodore, Behdaiat," *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises* 13 (2009): 257–320.

## The Wall Paintings and Icon of Kaftūn

MAT IMMERZEEL |  
NADA HÉLOU

The uncovering of the thirteenth-century wall paintings in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus of the Monastery of Kaftūn constitutes one of the most important finds of Middle Eastern Christian art in recent times. These murals are all the more interesting because the monastery also owns a double-sided icon of extraordinary quality, which turned out to be painted by one of the artists involved in the adornment of the interior of the church. In what follows, these works of art will be described and considered within the context of a group of icons preserved in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai.<sup>21</sup>

### *Description of the Wall Paintings*

The eastern wall, or triumphal arch, is preserved up to its original level, but has lost most of its decoration except for considerable fragments of an Annunciation in the spandrels. The Archangel Gabriel is rendered to the left and is turned toward the seated Virgin opposite, who is depicted against an architectural background. The conch of the apse is embellished with a Deesis, composed of the larger-than-life-sized figures of Christ Enthroned between the Virgin to the left and St. John the Baptist to the right (figs. 27–30). In between Christ and his Mother remains a seraph; another one may once have been seen to the right. All the names in these two scenes and the text on the book held by Christ are in Greek.

Judging from representations and dispersed traces of red borderlines and blue background on the nave's

21 For detailed studies on the murals and icon, and further references, see N. Hérou, "L'icône bilatérale de la Vierge de Kaftun au Liban: Une œuvre d'art syro-byzantin à l'époque des croisades," *Chronos* 7 (2003): 101–31; eadem, "Les fresques de Kaftun au Liban: La cohabitation des deux traditions byzantine et orientale," *Chronos* 20 (2009): 7–32; N. Hérou and M. Immerzeel, "Kaftun 2004: The Wall Paintings," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean* 16 (2005): 453–58; eadem, "Les peintures murales de Kaftūn," *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises* 11 (2007): 315–17; M. Immerzeel, with the co-operation of N. Hérou, "Icon Painting in the County of Tripoli of the Thirteenth Century," in *Interactions: Artistic Interchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*, ed. C. Hourihane, The Index of Christian Art Occasional Papers 9 (Princeton, 2007), 67–83; Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, 94–99, 125–42.



FIG. 27 View of the apse featuring the Deesis with the Annunciation scene above it. Condition following completion of wall painting conservation work (R. Tusznió).



FIG. 28 Fragment of the Deesis (R. Tusznió).



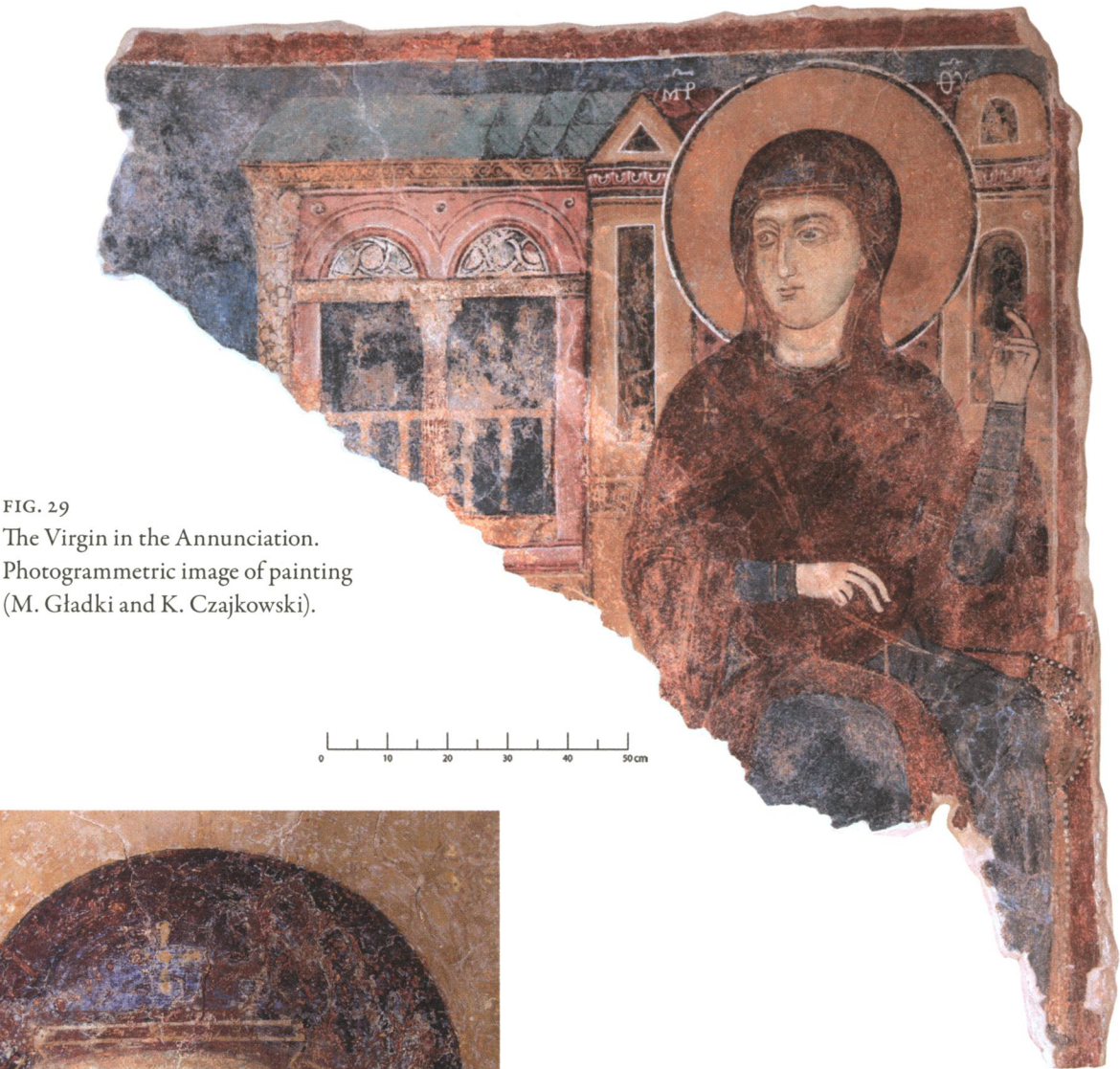


FIG. 29  
The Virgin in the Annunciation.  
Photogrammetric image of painting  
(M. Gładki and K. Czajkowski).



FIG. 30  
The Annunciation: face of  
the Virgin Mary (R. Tusznió).



FIG. 31  
Frescoes on the north wall of the nave: photogrammetric images  
of the face of an angel, the Communion of the Apostles, and  
St Lawrence (M. Gładki and K. Czajkowski).

longitudinal elevations, the zone above the arches was entirely adorned. The embellishment consisted of two friezes, the upper one of which was destroyed at the time of the construction of the later barrel vault. All that remains are a few fragments down low, for example, two feet on the north wall. The preserved sections of the lower frieze concentrate at the east ends of the walls. Here, the Communion of the Apostles is divided into two separate scenes, the one on the north wall being the better preserved. Six apostles turn toward Christ, who is depicted to the right handing out bread near the altar (fig. 31). Fragments of a corresponding composition

feature on the opposite wall. In contrast to the Deesis and Annunciation, the names of the apostles are written horizontally in Syriac. A panel to the left of the Communion on the north wall bears a medallion with the bust of an archangel (fig. 20). To the left, Greek is used again in an inscription near a now-vanished saint, reading ΔΟ.Α[. . .] (Domatius or Dometius?). In the easternmost spandrel, thus at the level of the altar in the church, an angel accompanies the tonsured deacon St. Lawrence (Ο ΑΓΙΟC ΛΑΥΡΕΝΤΙΟC). One imagines that a second deacon (Stephen?) was facing him from the opposite side.





FIG. 32 St. Bacchus.  
Photogrammetric image of wall  
painting (M. Gładki and K.  
Czajkowski).



The friezes are separated by a red-bordered white zone, bearing a now-fragmented Arabic inscription running over all walls. Part of it can be translated as “[Anta]kia and the entire East,” suggesting that the text included the name of the patriarch of Antioch of that time, though this title was common to the leaders of the Byzantine Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Maronite Churches alike.

When entering the church through the main entrance in the west wall, the spectator’s gaze is caught by the life-size figures of SS. Bacchus (left) and Sergius (right) on the soffits of the arches. These patron saints

of the church are faced by SS. George and Theodore, respectively (figs. 32–33). All four hold a lance in their right hand and a shield in their left. At least some of their names are written in both Greek and vertical Syriac. The soffits of the easternmost arches bear two frontally rendered standing monastic saints, each holding an unrolled blank scroll. An inscription in Greek labels the right saint on the northeast soffit as Arsenius (AP[C]ENIOC). The right saint on the northwest soffit has a square, cut-off beard, and may therefore be St. Sabas. Traces of ornamental panels below the saint and figures on the piers permit one to conclude that



FIG. 33 St. Bacchus and St. George. Photogrammetric image of paintings in the arcade (M. Gładki and K. Czajkowski).

the decoration originally extended to the lower zone. Moisture from the nearby river must have done its devastating work.

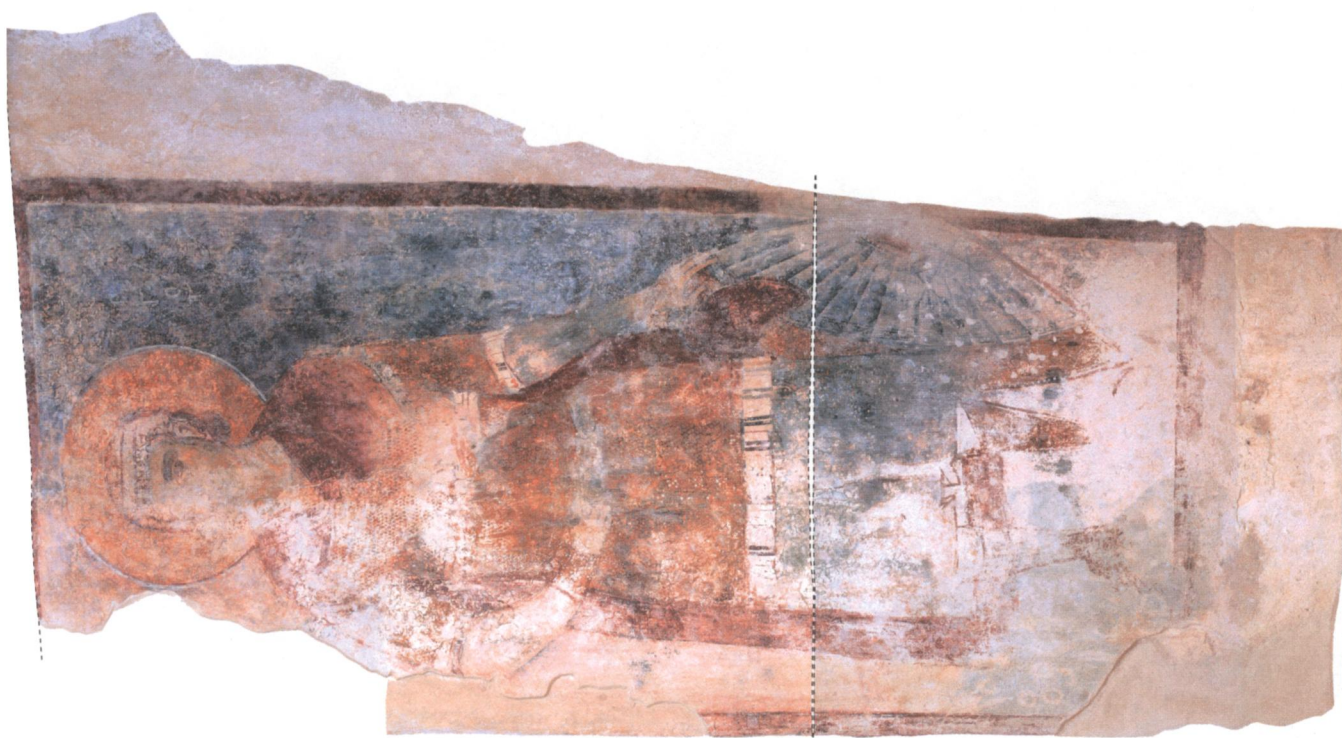
Stylistic differences illustrate that the decorative program was executed by two artists working side by side, one of whom embellished the longitudinal walls, and the other the triumphal arch, the conch, and the soffits of the arches. The first painter's work is characterized by a carefully elaborated execution in the Byzantine style, with graceful drapery, heavily shadowed faces, and intensive highlighting. Although the second artist, too, applied greenish shadowing and delicate highlighting, his approach is more graphic. The faces of the protagonists of the Annunciation, Christ, and the warrior saints are typified by rounded chins and almond-shaped eyes ending in prolonged lines toward the temple, below heavy eyebrows. The slightly flattened pupils seem to hover in the whites of the eyes. Nevertheless, in the case of the second master, too, his formation in the Byzantine tradition is evident.

#### *The Icon of Kaftūn and Its Counterparts in St. Catherine's Monastery*

The stylistic characteristics of the murals in the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus are echoed in a thirteenth-century icon preserved in the church of the nearby modern monastic complex. Judging from its impressive size (111 × 80 cm), the icon of Kaftūn must have been the central object of veneration in a sanctuary. It is painted on both sides, with a Virgin Hodegetria between two archangels on the front and the Baptism of Christ on the back (figs. 34–35). Long forgotten and abandoned, it was restored and exhibited in Paris in 1996 before it was returned to Kaftūn.<sup>22</sup> In particular the depiction of the Virgin displays striking similarities with the work of the second artist. Typified by her large oval face with almond-shaped eyes and connected eyebrows with fine, olive green shadows outlining her face, the

22 A. Lammens, in *Îcônes du Liban: Catalogue de l'exposition de la Mairie du Ve arrondissement et du Centre Culturel du Panthéon avec le parrainage du Ministère de la Culture (16 septembre–20 octobre 1996)* (Paris, 1996), 22–27.





Virgin's features are reminiscent of her two portrayals inside the church. In view of the striking similarities in brushwork, the obverse of the icon, too, can be attributed to this master. Remarkable is the plaster border of the obverse; it consists of a pattern of roundels with alternating images of lions and eagles (figs. 34–35).<sup>23</sup>

The Baptism on the reverse divulges characteristics that underline its evident eastern origin. Christ standing in the Jordan is flanked by St. John the Baptist to the left and six angels to the right, with a schematic mountainous landscape in the background and the personification of the river sitting to the bottom left. In the pitch-black sky, a white dove descends in three vertical white beams of light from the clouds. To this conventional scene the busts of two persons are added at the top, each holding an open scroll. The one on the left is King David, whose scroll is inscribed with Psalms (LXX) 114:3–4 and 77:17, written in Arabic. Opposite him, the Prophet Isaiah has a similar scroll, but here the

text is in horizontal Syriac (Isaiah 1:16, 55:1, and 12:3). By contrast, the names of St. John, David, and Isaiah, as well as the title of the scene, are in Greek. The oriental character of the icon comes to the fore not only in the Arabic, Greek, and Syriac inscriptions, but also in details such as the addition of the king and prophet to the Baptism,<sup>24</sup> the stylized, wavelike lines of the river, and the black background. A point of consideration is the question of whether this scene, too, was painted by the same artist. Admittedly, the facial features strongly resemble those on the icon's obverse, but on the other hand, the patterns of the dress of the angels recall those of the apostles of the Communion scene in the church. In conclusion, the icon should be seen in the context of a group of closely related artists working in Kaftūn and

23 N. Hérou, "Encore sur l'icône de Kaftun: rapport préliminaire sur le décor singulier de son encadrement," *Chronos* 24 (2011): 181–207.

24 For example, on a triptych in the Monastery of St. Catherine; see J. Folda, *Crusader Art in the Holy Land: From the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre, 1187–1291* (New York, 2005), 353–55, 538, fig. 210, on two iconostasis beams in the Church of St. Mercurius in Old Cairo, and one in the Church of the Virgin in Haret Zuwayla, Cairo; see G. Gabra and Z. Skalova, *Icons in the Nile Valley* (Cairo, 2006), 180–86, 200–207.



FIG. 34 Kaftūn icon: the Virgin Hodegetria, obverse (M. Bogacki).



FIG. 35 Kaftūn icon: the Baptism of Christ, reverse (M. Bogacki).

perhaps other places in the County of Tripoli. This local heritage branched out of a Byzantine school of painting.

The combined study of the icon and murals of Kaftūn has furnished indications for the possible origin from the County of Tripoli of several thirteenth-century icons in the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. Previously attributed by Kurt Weitzmann and Jaroslav Folda to Crusader artists of Italian origin,<sup>25</sup> this group displays so many stylistic and iconographic similarities with contemporary Christian works of art in the former County of Tripoli, in particular the murals and icon of Kaftūn, that their origin must be sought in this region. The most convincing painterly analogies feature on the reputed double-sided icon with the Virgin on its obverse and the mounted saints Sergius and Bacchus on its back (94.2 × 62.8 cm), and a larger-sized icon of

the Virgin Blachernitissa (99.2 × 67 cm). In view of the many analogies in details, both seem to be painted by the second master of the Church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus.

## Conclusion

As regards the dating of this group of wall paintings, the provisional estimate of the second quarter of the thirteenth century or slightly later is probably not far from the truth. Future research on other decorated churches in the area, which are being restored at present, might reveal more interesting details of the activities of Byzantine-trained painters in relation to the local tradition. A promising recent discovery is that of wall paintings in the Chapel of Saydet el-Kharayeb, or “Our Lady of the Ruins,” in Kfar Helda, some 10 km to the east of Kaftūn.<sup>26</sup>

25 K. Weitzmann, “Icon Painting in the Crusader Kingdom,” in *Studies in the Art at Sinai* (Princeton, 1982), 325–57, reprinted from *DOP* 20 (1966): 49–83; Folda, *Crusader Art*, 339–42, 532–34, figs. 197–99.

26 L. Nordiguian, “Note sur deux fragments de peinture à Saydet Kharayeb de Kfar Helda (Caza de Batroun),” *Tempora (Annales d’Histoire et d’Archéologie)* 14–15 (2003–4): 187–92; Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, 99.



A first analysis of these paintings points in the direction of the “Kaftūn Workshop.” Altogether, the fairly recent scholarly interest in the art of the local Christian communities in Lebanon might result in alternative views on art production in the Latin states, and undoubtedly also in a redefinition of the term “Crusader art.”

This transdisciplinary approach to the problem will, we hope, stimulate further research in the region in outlining new standards for fieldwork and the study of the material heritage of the medieval Christian East, particularly in Lebanon. Only a broader study of the wall paintings and their architectural context in the neighboring churches can change our knowledge about this particular expression of art of the local Christian communities.

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